

Americans Have Low “River IQ”

A recent telephone study conducted for the National Geographic Society indicates that most Americans are concerned about the health of river and lakes but that they don't understand them very well.

A summary of the study conducted by Washington D.C. based research firm Penn, Shoen & Berland Associates Inc. concludes that Americans have a low “River IQ.” Most of the people interviewed lacked basic knowledge about rivers. They failed to appreciate that they are part of a larger interrelated system in which their actions have negative affects, and they are unaware of the extent to which are rivers are in danger, the report concludes.

Further, respondents cite lack of time and lack of awareness of the problem as the major reasons they are not more personally involved in protecting and conserving rivers.

The paragraphs that follow provide a slightly more detailed summary of the findings.

Americans have a low River IQ

Study results indicate that Americans lack knowledge of even the most basic river facts.

- ✓ Nearly 2 in 3 Americans (63%) wrongly believe that water is a renewable resource.
- ✓ Most respondents (86%) do not know that riparian refers to the banks of a river or stream. Additionally, 44% of those surveyed could not define a watershed and 31% did not know what a floodplain is.

Lack of awareness that we all live in a watershed

The survey shows that Americans are profoundly unaware of the impact human actions have rivers and what constitutes the greatest impacts to water resources.

- ✓ Although we all live in watersheds, 44% of those asked could not define the term. In fact, according to the study, 65% of all Americans think that a watershed and a wetland are the same thing.
- ✓ Although nonpoint source pollution is the largest source of river pollution, nearly 9 in 10 surveyed (86%) are completely unfamiliar with the term.

Lack of awareness of sources of impacts

Though the Clean Water Act has done an effective job of cleaning up industrial point sources of pollution, many study participants still think somebody else is the problem.

- ✓ Three times as many Americans (44%) incorrectly identified industrial sources, as opposed to people's actions (15%), as the greatest source of river pollution.
- ✓ When asked how important a problem nonpoint source pollution is, only 19% correctly identified it as the largest source of water quality problems.

According to the study summary, much of this lack of awareness problem is related to how little Americans know about the importance of watershed health and how our actions within a watershed directly contribute to river pollution.

- ✓ Only one-third of Americans (35%) either identify land use, land development or urban sprawl as the most serious threats to watershed health.
- ✓ Only 17% of Americans identified human actions in the watershed—agricultural runoff, and urban sprawl—as the major threats to rivers. In fact, half of Americans (50%) believe that industrial facilities cause more water pollution than runoff from farms and cities in a watershed.
- ✓ Most respondents did not know that 16 times more runoff is produced by a one acre parking lot than by a one acre meadow. Nearly 7 in 10 (69%) of Americans underestimated the differences in runoff.
- ✓ When asked how large an oil slick is created by a person dumping a quart of oil down a storm drain, nearly half (45%) said 100 feet or less when the figure is actually 2 acres.

The survey also asked about how much water it takes to perform household tasks such as running the washing machine, dishwasher, or taking a 10 minute shower. Most participants got these questions wrong as well.

Lack of involvement=lack of time/knowledge

About 70% of Americans are not currently involved in river conservation and protection and only 7% say they are very involved.

- ✓ More than half of the people asked (53%) say the first or second reason they do not get involved is that they simply do not have enough time. The summary concludes that “This finding reflects their lack of awareness at how easy it is to take certain steps.”
- ✓ More than a third of the people (35%) express the sentiment “I don’t know how I can help.” According to the summary “The finding of this information gap is a major finding and supports the view of 60% of Americans that they simply do not know where to go if they were interested in getting more information about river protection and conservation.
- ✓ About one fifth (18%) say the first or second most important reason they are not involved is simply that they were not aware of the gravity of the situation. “This confirms the lack of awareness among Americans about the current state of the health of our nation’s rivers.”

Americans willing to take action

- ✓ Nearly everyone asked is willing to fix automobile oil leaks promptly and properly dispose of used fluid after changing oil (95%).
- ✓ More than 3 out of 4 questioned (77%) are very willing to sweep patios and sidewalks instead of hosing them to remove grass clipping and other debris.
- ✓ Many of those surveyed also embrace activities that make homes safer for rivers: disposing of household chemicals safely (83%), inspecting and repairing leaky sewers and septic tanks (81%), buying environmentally sound products (71%), minimizing use of fertilizers (57%), burying or flushing pet waste (55%), eliminating pesticide use (54%) and starting a compost pile (47%).

In conclusion a majority of the people in the National Geographic survey said that they would be interested in being involved in one way or another in making their watersheds healthier. They just need to be better informed about the problem and how they can be involved in the solution. Smaller percentages of people said that they would actually join environmental groups or donate time or money away from their homes to improve their watershed, however.